Statement on Nuclear Waste Policy

Energy and Power Subcommittee

of

The House Commerce Committee

Senator Harry Reid

April 29, 1997

The nuclear industry strategy is to shove nuclear waste into Nevada, no matter the risk, no matter the cost - without regard for the environment and with complete disregard for public health and safety.

Centralized interim storage is the heart of the industry's strategy and this bill, in spite of testimony by the Nuclear Waste Technical Review Board that a centralized interim storage facility is not needed. This highly respected board of eminent scientists concluded that spent nuclear fuel can be stored on-site safely and cheaply until such time that a permanent repository is operational.

The House should oppose this bill because its solution to the nation's nuclear waste dilemma is far worse, more dangerous, and more expensive than continued on-site storage at the present sites until a permanent repository is open.

Centralized interim storage is far worse because it would store spent nuclear fuel indefinitely in shipping containers, on an outdoor cement pad, without the waste isolation promised by containment in emplacement canisters that are stored in an underground geologic repository. There would be no surrounding repository to protect the canisters from damage and corrosion. There would be no surrounding repository to impede the migration of radioactive waste from leaking canisters.

Centralized interim storage would be more dangerous than the status quo because a completely unprepared, unplanned, and unequipped transportation system would be used to move waste all around the country.

The Nuclear Waste Technical Review Board and the Department of Energy's Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management have both testified that we are not ready to undertake this massive transportation program. They cite lack of training for the transportation crews, lack of tested and certified shipping canisters, and a completely inadequate emergency response capability.

No reasonable person should accept the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's survivability standards for shipping canisters. We all know that accidents occur at speeds higher than the 30 mph standard required by the NRC. NRC thermal standards to ensure that canisters do not breech in a fire are equally inadequate: canisters are required to survive for only 30 minutes in a fire at 1475 degrees Fahrenheit. But diesel fuel, used in virtually all trucks and trains, burns at an average temperature of 1800

degrees, and sometimes much hotter than that. Moreover, a diesel fire at one accident was observed to last 4 days, more than 180 times the NRC standard for canister survivability.

Even with the best planning, statistics predict that there will be at least 150 accidents involving this exceptionally dangerous waste. Inadequate shipping containers and inadequate emergency response capability are preludes to disaster.

Moving this dangerous material before we are ready, before we are equipped and trained to respond to either accidents or terrorist actions, leaves the country vulnerable to the most damaging and costly environmental accident in its history.

The bottom line of this bill is that the country would still be storing spent fuel temporarily, in one more interim site than before. And it would come at the cost of running this dangerous material all around the country before a safe transportation system is ready. Under the nuclear industry's strategy, there would be 110 interim storage sites instead of the present 109.

This nuclear waste bill is not about managing the nuclear power industry's legacy. It is all about money and politics. It is all about the nuclear industry's money: they want more of it. And it is all about the use of power politics to make money for the nuclear power industry that already is grabbing profits that average 17% of gross revenue receipts.

The country would be far better served by initiatives that improve the way spent nuclear fuel is managed, by changes that improve the safety of storing high level radioactive waste, by changes that protect the environment.

For example, the country would be far better served by spending our energies on renewing the canceled multi-purpose canister program. The program was canceled because the Congress, time and again, refused the funds requested by the permanent repository development program. That program that would provide a single canister that would serve as an interim storage container, as a transportation container and, finally, as a repository emplacement container.

Multi-purpose canisters could be engineered to contain waste material in all possible accident scenarios, to contain waste for the duration of on-site storage, and further, to contain the waste for an indefinite disposal period. These would therefore provide the safest containment for interim storage possible.

Multi-purpose containers would also provide a most significant safety improvement by assuring that, once removed from the cooling ponds and placed in the container, spent nuclear fuel need never be handled again.

Multi-purpose canisters would ensure the safety of on-site storage until a repository is open, and would permit the direct emplacement of spent fuel in the repository when it arrived, allowing minimal expense for developing an emplacement staging facility at the repository. No interim storage facility at the repository would be required and significant savings to the program would result.

Studies of permanent disposal options should continue so that a defensible and convincing solution can be found. Recent events in Germany emphasize just how important it is to convince the public that the shipment and disposal of this material is safe and reasonable. In March of this year, it cost the German Government $150 M, 173 injuries, 500 arrests and the deployment of 30,000 police to move just 6 containers of nuclear waste less than 300 miles. Now the German Parliament is reconsidering their policy.

The national disposal program should be encouraged to reach a scientifically sound solution before this reckless, dangerous, and unnecessary interim storage move is taken.

This bill places schedule above scientific evaluation. It places schedule above confidence in the program outcome. All of our experience has shown that placing schedule above quality, that replacing deliberation and deliberate progress with hysterical schedules, leads to disaster. Just look at the mess left by our nuclear weapons production schedule, driven by perceived urgencies of the Cold War. Just remember the Discovery disaster that derived from a management decision to hope for the best, but meet the schedule. Sooner or later, we need to learn from our mistakes, not just blindly continue to make them over and over again.